Episode 3: Mountain, Moor & Forest

Introduction:

The hulder-folk, sometimes referred to as the hidden-folk or subterraneans, are preternatural beings that populate wild areas and are given to enticement and abduction. While thought to live beneath the ground, they are often sighted, heard and experienced in forests, mountains and moors. In this episode, we will catch glimpses of the huldra, a stunningly beautiful woman with long hair and an animal's tail; we will encounter Danish elves, far from the sweet beings of Christmas tradition but rather dangerous figures whose dances can cause madness and whose powers can cause sickness. We will encounter human beings whose lives are forever altered by their encounters with the hulder-folk. Indeed, it is often dangerous for humans to cross paths with the hidden-folk and in Norwegian folklore, there is a phrase for someone who has disappeared in the wilderness or who displays psychological abnormalities, the result of having encountered the huldufolk. They are said to have been 'taken into the mountain.'

And we will see these beings through a character we met in episode 1: through the eyes of the projected soul of a Finn, another name for a Sámi or Lapp, the Finno-Ugric speaking indigenous population of Northern Scandinavia who bear some cultural resemblance to Inuit or Esquimaux - and this Finn is not to be confused with the modern Finns of Finland. In Norwegian and Swedish folklore, the Finns are often attributed with magical powers, very much rooted in Lapp shamanic traditions. One of these powers was the ability to project the soul, separated from the body, through a sort of shamanic trance and travel to distant places. The Norwegian word 'hug' in fact refers to the soul and previous episodes explore the lore surrounding the ability of the hug to separate from the human body. The Finn, who is a central character I have constructed as the main narrative viewpoint, has the ability to do this at will. While on such a soul journey, our Finn will witness the frightening and unsettling encounters between human beings and the hidden folk.

The hidden folk are so called because they are largely invisible to normal human eyes. This theme of invisibility is most poignantly rendered in an Icelandic origin myth, to that primal couple ubiquitous in Christendom, Adam and Eve. The huldufolk were originally children of Eve, the primordial mother, who lived with her large family in an idyllic garden surrounded by a sort of northern paradise: craggy cliffs and dramatic seaside, deep caverns and forest-lined rivers. The children were free to explore this paradise but, in one instance, were instructed to return home in time for bathing and grooming as they had a very special guest arriving. However, as children do, one particular group of Eve's children lost track of time, for they had found something extraordinary on a hill - small mounds with unusual holes, which looked like frozen water bubbles; upon closer inspection it gave the children the impression of being something like windows. Other mounds looked like piles of mud frozen in mid-ooze. These strange rocks were so fascinating: some were bare and ragged, while others were covered in a springy moss. So, the children lost track of time, came home filthy and had no time for a bath. The poor mother was so ashamed of their appearance that she sent them off to play, keeping her clean and groomed children in the house. She then lied to the special mysterious guest, saying ALL her

children were present. The special mysterious guest, however, knew better and Eve heard him whisper:

'Whatever has been hidden from me, shall be hidden from all people.'

And later, when the guest had departed and Eve went looking for her children, she heard them giggling and talking but could not find them. She searched and searched and continued hearing them but could not find them. Then, she realised the significance of the stranger's words.

When the children appeared to her, they were transformed. Though they retained their original form, they were bright, radiant and full of an otherworldly beauty. They could also transcend speech and communicate directly with each other's minds. And they were drawn to that strange rocky field with the moss-covered stones, spending hour upon hour exploring and playing.

And though they tried to share their experiences with their other brothers and sisters, a rift deepened. The other children of Eve and the Huldufolk had so little in common anymore that, eventually, the Huldufolk spent nearly all of their time in the rocky field and eventually remained their: subterranean, hidden citizens of another realm.

This rift between the huldufolk and human beings will be explored in this episode's stories.

(music interlude)

Story 1: Mountains & Madness

As the Finn's hug, his travelling soul, soared over mountain lakes and high mountain farms, tiny golden light in the windows of turf-covered roofs, as he soared over the soothing monochromatics of winter, he felt pulled towards the Nordamark. Something awaited him there. His soul flew towards the great hum of that dark forest, the birch clusters and conifers swaddled by pure white, swathed in an ancient cooing silence, like a crone's cracked and ragged tones. The Finn felt pulled just beyond, to the borders of this place, the juncture of winter's very soul. As ice-sheened twilight spread across the world, he finally settled just outside the window of a cottage, as warm as beating heart. Yet, within, he sensed **cave-blackness and perpetual exile, soul-deep scars born by someone who had known hulder-lairs and their uncanny timelessness**.

An old man sat in front of the fire with his family, including a young girl, which Finn was surprised to see was full of **wild-goat soul** and spiritual sight. Her hug was aflame.

And the old man, ancient, sickly and with a fragility that soaked down to his very bones - his hug carried the branding, the burn marks of the hulder-shot, of the flaming switches that left irreparable damage to the human soul. By the way the young girl stared at the old man, the Finn wondered if she saw it too. The welts, soulish burns, that could not be seen by ordinary human eyes.

Nonetheless, what was evident was the way the old-man's cave black eyes stared into nothing, the way he murmured sometimes in girlish tones and sometimes in baritone babble, like the ancient language of an elder god, as if the Jotuns spoke through him. His hug seemed

to shift in shape, size and colour and Finn knew that this must be bewildering for the poor soul, that the old man must perceive the world around him as unreal, lifeless and foggy.

Then, the old man sat straight up, the movement somehow like a doll being forced into position by childish hands. His head bobbed from side to side, much like a dog's when it expresses curious bewilderment. And his gaze was directed at a dark corner of the cottage, beyond the firelight. The Finn noticed that Goat Girl (for so he now deemed her because of her wild goat soul) was cowering by the fire and was also staring into the dark corner - and by the way she wrapped her arms around herself and drew her knees in, he knew she was seeing IT too.

The lithe slender-waisted figure was like an ink drawing, ink formed from cave-black subterranean rivers, falling gracefully into mind-bending depths. A female figure writhed and taunted and spun in that black corner, a tail whipping back and forth, like a cow's when it is shooing away flies. There was anger and sadness in her movements.

Everyone, even Finn, cringed when the old man began to shriek: 'Gyri Ornehovd! I see you well enough! Though the world seems far from me, like a taunting vista at the end of a long mountain cave, I see you. I see you!'

And as the old man's sobs poured forth **cave-blackness and perpetual exile, soul-deep scars born by someone who had known hulder-lairs and their uncanny timelessness, the Finn remembered.**

He remembered the old man from long ago and his mountain prison. For Finn had been there.

(Music interlude)

The Finn recalled that the old man was once a handsome young shepherd. And that when he had first saw this young shepherd, he lay on a grassy hillock, singing softly, his silver voice merging with the blue-tint of twilight, like moonlight on a mountain lake. All was hush-voiced and subdued and cool to the eyes.

Peaceful yes, but something was...off. The Finn narrowed his eyes, for a thin veil of sensuality soaked the mountain-scape, a girlish whisper, full-mouthed and full-bodied, molding the land into bewitching curvatures.

Yes, the peace was a spell. The Finn tried to reach the young man, tried to call to him, to move quickly away from that cave-mouth exhaling plutonian breath, but the spell was too great. His hug was not powerful enough, was not visible to the shepherd, whose eyes were closed, whose very mind was closed to the known world.

Bursting from the cave's blackness, a beautiful girlish form tiptoed towards the young man, her cow's tail lashing back and forth with excitement. She knelt down beside him and ran her fingers over his features, his chest - and close by in the field was the shepherd's cattle, which he had been sent to retrieve. And when the hulder grabbed the shepherd by the feet and began dragging him towards the cave, the cows moaned and bellowed, something strained and shrieking in their wide-eyed bovine terror. And as the cave's blackness swallowed both the hulder and the shepherd, the cows stampeded down the hillside.

The Finn followed them into that space of blackness and exile - and heard a commotion from the valley. Heard the shots of the search party and the clamoring dissonant church bells, an auditory beacon for the wilderness-bewildered soul.

And while the search party shouted and shot, the Finn sensed a strange shifting of time and space all around him, saw the sleeping form of the shepherd being pulled into a hopelessly narrow passage, followed as the young man was dragged into depths that did not make sense, even in this vast mountain. The Finn felt very afraid that even he would get lost but summoned his courage for the sake of the shepherd.

And when they finally arrived into a blue litten cave, the huldra had awoken the shepherd, who stared at the huldra's form in both longing and terror. For her beauty was like a view from a mountaintop….but her tail. Her tail was all barnyard muck and matted animal fur. It whipped at her from side to side as if both in flagellation and fly-killing irritation. So strange, thought the Finn, that her wildness should be so beautiful, so unsettling and so disgusting all at the same time. The shepherd must have thought the same, for his face alternated between fearful cringes and awe-struck lust.

All the while, the Finn hid in a dark corner of the cave. He knew what he must do.

After the huldra had cradled the shepherd, her manure matted tail sliding back and forth contentedly on the dusty cave floor, she would retreat into a black tunnel at the sound of her father calling her. And the Finn would then whisper into the shepherd's mesmerised mind reminders of home. Of sunlight and feast days and church bells and green pastures. Then, a small knowing light would return to Ola's eyes (for that was the shepherd's name).

Yet, it seemed hopeless, for the huldra always returned and wove her spell. The Finn pitied her desire, pitied her infatuation with this young man, so other than and enticing to her cave-born mind. Yet, her desire, her feminine wiles were a prison to this young man, who did not belong to this realm. The Finn felt pity for them both.

The Finn stayed in the cave-blackness for many days, perhaps many weeks - remained in that uncanny timeless realm - continued to whisper reminders of home to Ola, blew into this mind with his soul breath word pictures of sunlight and feast days and church bells and green pastures.

And when the huldra returned with the harp, when she taught him to play tunes that reminded the Finn of birds twittering, of the lamenting whine of the lur during a summer's evening, he felt quite hopeless that he could ever break the spell. For the harp spun a pasture world within the cave's blackness, made Ola see blue sky where there was really only a stony vault, made him see grass where there was only dusty bedrock.

Now, when the huldra retreated again to her father, the Finn emerged again from his shadow and saw that Ola's skin was taking on a grey-tinge, sunlight deprived aspect. His very form seemed….softened, as if his frame were melting wax, as if his bones were becoming all cooked potato softness. He would die in this place.

So the Finn summoned all his powers, chanted wind rhythms, sang the buzzings and murmurings of sun-soaked fields, blew into Ola's mind with his soul breath word pictures of

sunlight and feast days and church bells and green pastures. The Finn ululated the flapping of white linen around a girl's shapely legs; he warbled and stomped the sweating laughing beats of a village dance.

And from the dark tunnel, he could hear angry feet pattering. The Finn retreated to his dark corner.

Ola's eyes widened and with weakened voice cried out: 'In Jesus name, shall I never return to my folk?!'

All illusion shattered at the holy incantation; the blue litten cave with its uncanny timelessness, with its hostile darkness, exhaled, sighed and surrendered.

And the huldra stood at the mouth of black passage and wept. The Finn pitied her for she loved him in her way, though her love would have possessed him so thoroughly that all his life force would have been drained. No - it must be this way.

With a sigh, the huldra told Ola: 'Keep well to the side when you pass through the door from our realm, else my father will harm you.' Without another word, she took a step back into the darkness, her naked feet pattering, like blind pearlescent lizards. A lonely echoing sound.

(Music interval)

As the Finn gazed at the old man from the window, he desperately wished Ola would have taken heed. But in his haste to flee that rock prison, Ola had not kept well to the side.

And the old man, ancient, sickly and with a fragility that soaked down to his very bones - his hug carried the branding, the burn marks of the hulder-shot, of the flaming switches that left irreparable damage to the human soul. By the way Goat Girl stared at the old man, the Finn wondered if she saw it too. The welts, soulish burns, that could not be seen by ordinary human eyes.

Story 2: Goat Girl & The Huldra Herd

The verdency of this place, the suppleness of the fine whispering grass on swelling hills - the shush-shush and creek of pine copses being tossed by the wind - the pastoral highlands slanting gently upward from the river valley…

Well, it made her feel as wild as a goat.

And the Finn followed calmly, wondering if he were invisible to her eyes too. She was bid to take food to her father who was at the mill on the hill and the Finn followed, curious about Goat Girl full of **wild-goat soul** and spiritual sight. Whose hug was aflame.

Once provisions were delivered, Goat Girl couldn't bear to be parted from this high place, with the fine whispering grass and the shush-shush and creek of the pine copses. Felt the heavy sensuality of it all kiss and coddle her senses, felt the thrill of cool and sun in her soul. Goat Girl threw herself onto the grass, sensing that the very earth wanted to cradle her and send visions into her mind's eye. It was too true and beautiful and luxurious to resist.

She lay on her side so that the thick mountain woodland could be seen through the gentle blades of grass that perforated her vision. She willed something in herself to see further into the mountain woodland, to see further down those tree-shaded paths than normal human eyes could.

And the Finn could see that her hug was aflame.

Her hug was as golden and red-hued as the horizon, which pulled that sphere of ruby and molten light into slow oblivion. Goat Girl sighed with drooping eyes, which fluttered and closed.

And the light of dying day mingled with that fey mingling of star-milk and blue sky, cast a subdued and yet strangely wild sheen onto the world. The Finn felt a prickling, an inward raising of hackles - for something approached, a strange wind rushing down the dark forest path, a herald of sorts.

First, a lur - a mountain horn call -
resounded, distant and travelling swiftly over impossible distances as a canyon-voiced echoe. And then, down that forest path, a dog's barking and the sound of cowbells as clear as silver. In all of these sounds, there was a terrible clarity, too clear for human ears to bear.

The Finn watched as Goat Girl's eyes widened into knowing and bewilderment. She sat straight up and there was a dense clarity in her sinewy calves and arms too. Stark, strong and poised.

And under that fey mingling of star-milk and blue sky, which seemed now to hover indefinitely over the world, some pack horses came over the ridge, loaded with cauldrons, flasks of whey and butter churns. There came a herd of grey bulls, so robust they seemed something of the imagination and not of the earth; there came large flamed cows and on their horns were golden buttons and around their necks silver bells. Goat Girl stood now and seemed to sway back and forth; the Finn saw a sublime gold overwhelm her hug, like a rich and luscious dream. Indeed, this fey herd was sublime in its sheer wealth and vitality: the musculature and the size rich and bountiful. And the beautiful cows bearing the precious bounty of the earth.

Yet for all the beauty, the Finn feared for Goat Girl's mind. The longing, the desire this sight conjured in human hearts could swell the soul to bursting, could make one so wild in the mind's eye that all normal perception became hazy - full of fey fog.

Then, emerging through the middle of the herd was a shepherdess, preternaturally tall and with a dense clarity in the sinewy calves that peaked from under a skirt slightly hiked and tucked into a belt - a dense clarity in her sinewy forearms. In her giantess hand was a lur - indeed, this had been the source of that shrilly sinuous, yet deep and echoing, otherworldly horn-call. A call to her precious cattle, the sacredness of these beasts echoed in the silver handles of the milking-pail held in the giantess's other hand. She whispered to the cows, called them by unearthly mysterious names and called them in that soprano beckoning so familiar to Goat Girl, who smiled at the sight. She was like Frigga, queenly and divine, sculpted from both mountain and grass, perfectly formed for a terrain both rocky and demanding yet undulating and curvaceous.

The Finn watched with interest as Goat Girl began to walk towards the huldra-herd. A bold move, yet this girl was different from the rest. Fey and distant to her known world, the girl smiled as if her eyes had rested on the face of an old and dear friend.

But as the girl approached, they disappeared.

Except the cattle dog and another girl in a blue skirt - whose cow tail swished beneath the hem with the smile we sense in a dog's wagging tail.

Goat Girl walked with rapid longing towards the oddly clad shepherd-girl, her skirt dipped in the very substance of bluest sky and water. The Finn sensed a strange kinship and a filling up of an infinite hole in Goat Girl, whose flaming hug seemed to also quiver with an appalling sense of loneliness. And sometimes even the agony of abandonment. But at the sight of the herd and this huldra, this oddity of a girl was all pulsating fullness.

And so Goal Girl followed the blue clad huldra, into the forest...into shadow-soaked places, where the twilight gloom and its thrilling mystery soon deepened into a haunted indigo. Soon, she wandered in blackness, catching glimpses of the blue skirt and swishing cow tail.

And towering above the darkening tree line were the Vetle Mountains - another black mass in the blackness. The mountains seemed to be a gaping mouth above the tree lines, swallowing utterly her sense of herself. And though the village church bells rang, beckoning her back to the world of sunlight and feast days and green pastures, she felt - down where her soul intersected her bones - that despite the terror, she wanted this. She wanted to be taken into the mountain.

(Music interlude)

And now when the villagers tell the story, they say that Goat Girl returned only after many hours of ringing the church bells and that there was something very strange about her...though they couldn't quite put their finger on the change - something indigo black and blue-sky and pasture-free about her. And though she was a normal enough herding girl now, there were times where she seemed to look straight through a person, even in mid-conversation - and when this happened, any villager knew that she would promptly head straight for the hill pastures and the forest.

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Story 3: Dead Elves (Denmark)

It had been some time since the Finn's hug had been drawn to the land of the Danes, but this pull towards Troldeskov (for this was the name whispered to him by ethereal whispers) and it's gnarled trees, like agonised petrified trolls, was irresistible. The moss colonised beech trees were venerable, tortuous and in their arboreal twilight; the forest floor was gorged with the decaying forest detritus - and the brilliant green moss was also gorged with this death. Perhaps the pull was a strange sense of paradox - that this place was always dying and yet always living - dying extravagantly and living prolifically. The Finn could *feel* this gorging, this constant movement of loamy food through tubes, could smell the exhalation down to the very back of his throat. And for miles this constant feeding and dying and growth - this infinite cycle, this beautiful but grotesque circle - for miles and miles it extended as one living being.

And utterly small and non-descript in the midst of this was a young herding boy, watching his gorging bovine with a small smile.

The Finn was startled; first, by the green of the grass in this small clearing, where the foliage overhead was thinned slightly. Green beyond comprehension. The grass was preternaturally thick, like the hair of a healthy, robust and handsome young person. He sensed a...*sweetness* about the space. A syrup coursing through the grass.

Then, in the Finn's ear came a small sing-song chanting: 'Dead Elves, Dead Elves, Dead Elves.'

And as this fey whisper continued in his mind, his attention was drawn to a ring of tan mushrooms with thick caps - they had a tanned dense aspect, like thick loaves of golden bread. And from them, that same sense of syrup, of sweetness, of life fortified. It sent both hunger and deep satisfaction into the Finn's hug and he might of wandered into that fairy ring had he not have known better.

For he sensed that beneath that sweetness - which kept these fairy ring mushrooms from decaying - there was a perverse reversal to the order of that forest: that order of perpetual decay & death but also thriving life. No, the fairy ring fungi resisted death through a fey syrup, which perhaps fed the beauty of that ethereal green grass…..but feeding a madness in humans, who did not belong to that order. There was something unending, eternal in that circle - and while it mimicked the prolific cycle of growth in Troldeskov, it also brought a sense of terror to the Finn - a sense of that paradox that this place was always dying and yet always living - dying extravagantly and living prolifically - and could easily devour a single solitary human being. It was strange that a circle of mushrooms could give the Finn such sensations...but this was a fairy ring and not just an ordinary patch of fungi in a forest glade.

And the herding boy stood right in the middle, his eyes glazed, his smile sweet. His head was titled as if he heard something.

Indeed, the whispered proclamation of 'Dead Elves! Dead Elves' still lingered in the back of the Finn's mind and he realised that this was the name this strange place, a most potent haunt of what the Danes called the Elveskud. Yet, somehow he knew that this was not what was luring the herding boy's mind into alien realms.

And as the heard of cows instinctively began moving back towards the homestead, the Finn finally heard it: a fine voice, musical like bird song and loamy like the forest floor, a voice called the boys name in a beckoning sing-song: 'Jen Bovens! Jen Bovens!' So powerful was the disorienting nature of his voice that even the Finn had to fight both a feeling of vertigo and the desire to dance around wildly in circles.

And dashing out of the fairy ring and towards the edge of the forest, towards the moor, the boy called 'Here I am!'

The Finn followed and as twilight deepened he heard the panicked shouts of other adult voices coursing and ricocheting through the trees, voices also shouting the name of the boy: 'Jen Bovens!' These were panicked adults, mother and father and uncles and aunties who panicked because little Jen had not returned home with the cows by noon.

And the Finn watched a most extraordinary scene as Jen's kin arrived at the edge of the forest and scanned the wide expanse of moorland.

Her voice, the voice of a most potent and motherly elveskund, a voice lullaby-rich that promised to fill all the holes left, inevitably, by the imperfections of our own mothers. Lullaby-rich and full of promise to lonely herding boys who felt lonely even amongst their kin. And it was this call, so rich and immense, that even the adults heard it - so immense and so full of the promise of other worlds that it seemed to come from all the cardinal directions and even from directions not known to the human mind.

So immense and full was this unearthly voice calling ‘Jen Bovens’ that the searching adults became disoriented and nearly became lost themselves.

Then, suddenly, the boy ran past the search party, full speed through the long grass, through the twilight-shaded gloom of Troldeskov. He ran past without even looking at them and the stunned adults ran after him. Finally catching him, his father held him firmly in his arms.

The Finn came closer and peered into the boy’s face. Jen’s pupils were wildly and profoundly dilated as if their blackness sought to conquer the whole of him. And all the while the boy struggled and writhed and shouted: ‘Don’t you hear how she’s calling for me?! Don’t you hear?!’

The Finn took a few steps back and walked sadly on, knowing this voice - this call that had all the immensity of all the cardinal directions - was too much even for him. He knew how the boy would fare, for the boy had danced with the elves and would grow no more. Time had now halted for him.

And when that voice - immense and rich and full of warm-milk promise - when that voice began to bear down upon the Finn, began to speak syrup-promises to his injured and lonely spaces, began calling his real name (which no man knew) - well, he knew it as time to leave this haunt of the Elveskud, to leave Troldeskov and its fairy rings.

Outro

First, I’d like to thank Simon Hughes again for being a translator extraordinaire and a first-rate expert in the lore of the north! He has provided invaluable sources, most notably for this episode the work of Peter Christen Asbjornson, whose work ‘the mountain and the pasture’ provided the frame narratives for stories one and two.

The first story remains true to Asbjornson’s: the shepherd boy not returning and being trapped by a hulder with a ‘horrible tail.’ And this, of course, being the back story of the sickly old man. I took creative liberties in fleshing out the shepherd boy’s cave experience, emphasising the idea of timelessness and enchantment. In the original, Ola plays an instrument called the ‘Jew’s Harp’ and Ola’s playing is so beautiful it reminded the teller of ‘the twittering of birds and of the lamenting whin of the our during a summer evening.’ I decided to have the Finn speak to and remind Ola of these beautiful things from his own world in order to work this central character into the story as something more than a passive observer.

Also, in the original tale that the second story is based on, the girl who narrates says she was ‘as wild as a goat’ in her youth, which inspired me to call the main character Goat Girl. Again, the frame of my story is true to the original except for the ending where the huldra heard disappears. I added a new ending which is actually from a separate tale, which describes a girl who had been ‘taken into the mountain.’

The story ‘Dead Elves’ is a combinaton of two stories: one about a boy who no longer grows because he danced with the elveskund and another about a boy who becomes lost because of his pursuit of an enticing elven voice. I also chose to set the story in a Danish woodland called Troldeskov (or Troll Forest). Most, if not all, of my retelling of existing lore are often placed in specific locations so that listeners can gain the sense of setting so often lacking

in the original narratives, presumably because the original listeners of these oral traditions already had the sense of setting from experience.

If you're interested in fairy rings, it's interesting to note that having done some research on them, I discovered that the fungi contains a special sugar called trehalose, which prevents death by desiccation and contributes to the notable green colour of fairy ring grass.

Lastly, for further reading, see Simon Hugh's blog norwegianfolktales.blogspot.com, a book called 'Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend' compiled editors Kvideland and Sehmsdorf. Another interesting book to check out is called 'The Guardians of Iceland' which contains interesting tales of the Icelandic huldufolk.

Thanks to everyone who has supported me on Patreon, even during a much needed summer hiatus. I'm now back and ready to give my listeners a rich experience of the very rich and imaginative folklore of the Nordic world.